

Koraljka Kuzman Šlogar

Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku
Šubićeva 42, 10 000 Zagreb
koraljka@ief.hr

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Mystical Visualization of Food

This article presents the idea of food visualization in museums, inspired by the ancient Chinese knowledge of feng shui. Since this idea appears somewhat exotic and mystical, to many it may seem frivolous, but I consider it intriguing enough to draw the attention of museum scientists and ethnologists.

The idea that I am presenting here is that the ancient Chinese knowledge of feng shui can serve as a guide in interior decorating, and this could be applied to museum exhibitions as well. Following the guidelines of feng shui and their successful application to organizing and decorating exhibitions, could make a positive impression on the audience and make exhibitions more noted and better-received.

Key words: Food, museum, feng shui, interior design

The global market of cultures formed in the age of mass media (internet having the key role) has brought other cultures and worldviews closer to our own and has 'infested' our 'world' with new ideas. Very popular and broadly accepted are the great teachings of the Far East, which have been introduced to all the corners of the world and have affected many areas of everyday life. The influence of their spiritual and mystical tendencies can today be observed in all walks of life, from medicine, art and religion, through housing, to pass time. One of these trends is unmistakably *feng shui*, traditional Chinese knowledge the primary purpose of which is finding locations where the vital energy of earth and heaven is concentrated and which, therefore, are the most suitable places for erecting graves, building houses and cities (Encyclopedia of Living Religions 1981:200). Today it is popularly defined as the art of choosing and decorating the appropriate living surroundings.

Even though *feng shui* is primarily perceived as the art of interior and exterior decoration, it has affected many aspects of everyday life, food being one of them.¹

We can interpret the quality of food in terms of *feng shui*, but, using knowledge of *feng shui*, we can also discuss its production, preparation of meals, location and decoration of places where food is prepared (kitchen) or eaten (dinning room) and, finally, we can talk about *feng shui* in the context of museum presentation of food, which is the topic of this article. Here we can talk about the design of the exhibition, organization and decoration of exhibition rooms or we can discuss specific details such as arranging tables and decoration of food on the plates.

The topic of the scientific conference held at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in 2007, which accompanied the exhibition 'The World of Food in Croatia', gave me the incentive to think about the visualization of food in museums in terms of *feng shui*. However, my presentation of this somewhat exotic and mystical idea was actually based on the results of my previous research, which lasted for several years, on the popularity of *feng shui* throughout the world and on its perception and reception in contemporary Croatia.² My intention in this article was to present a new, different approach to designing museum exhibitions, which could, eventually, provide curators with an inspiring set of guidelines in designing exhibitions and in selection and arrangement of the exhibits. But before I continue with the analysis of this topic (but without burdening the text with critical judgments!), for its better understanding it is important to list some basic principles of *feng shui* which will outline the possibilities of its practical application.

A few notes on Feng shui

Feng shui could be shortly defined as an art of harmonization of a person's life with the forces of the universe and the laws of nature. Behind its basic philosophy is the belief that the Earth is a living organism. *Ch'i (qi)*, roughly translated as 'energy', is an invisible life force, which constitutes everything and sets everything in motion, and a harmonious flow of this energy is very important. Furthermore, everything is comprised of the two opposing, but complementary forces, *yin* and *yang*, and harmony is achieved when they are in balance (Tonante 2002:13). The existence of these forces is observable in everything that surrounds us. *Yin* represents the shadowy, dark, receptive, passive, and *yang* sunny, light, forceful and active state (comp. Dragičević 2002:55, Feuchtwang 1974:36, Chuen 1997:18). Five forms of energy are created out

¹ Simon Brown, an expert on *feng shui*, and a chef, Steven Saunders have written a book together dedicated to *feng shui* food. It contains advice on how to properly serve food for various occasions: from romantic dinners and family gatherings to business lunches, with special guidelines for weddings, children's parties, summer picnics, etc. (Brown, Simon & Saunders, Steven: *Feng Shui Food*, The Lyon Press, 2000).

² This research resulted in my Master thesis entitled *Feng shui: anthropological analysis of the socio-cultural phenomenon*, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2006.